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### Pruning Spruce and Firs

Cooperative Extension South Dakota State University

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# Pruning Spruce and Firs

Cooperative Extension Service  
South Dakota State University  
U. S. Department of Agriculture

# Pruning Spruce and Firs

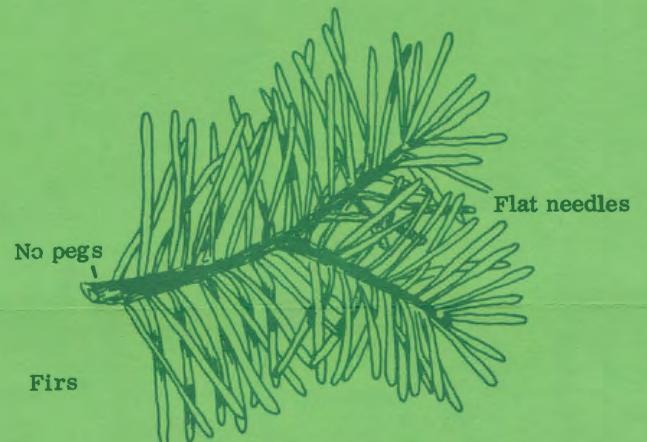
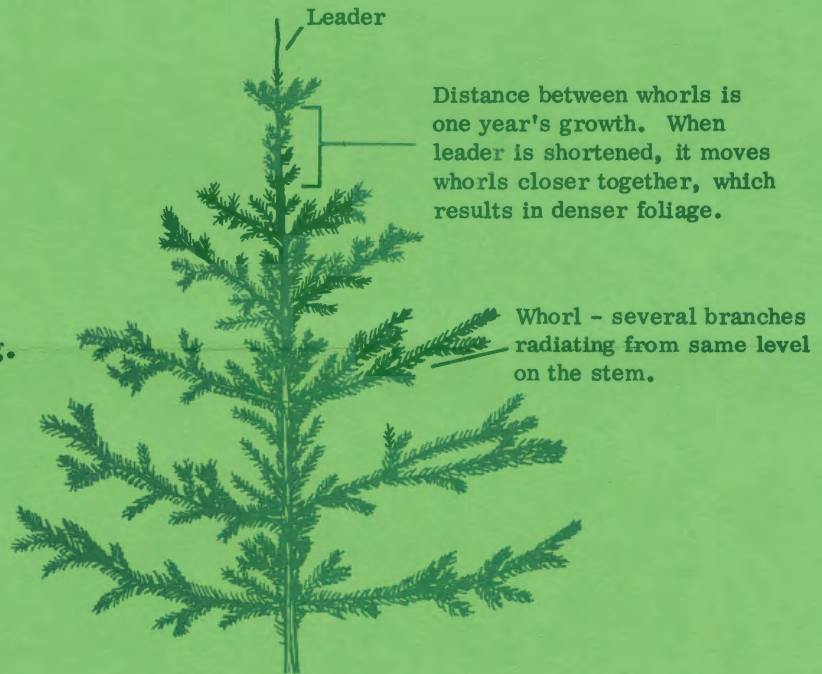
Larry Helwig, Extension forester

Your evergreens will add beauty and enhance your property's value. But don't sit back and expect them to do these jobs by themselves.

By proper pruning you can fit an evergreen exactly to your needs, and you can strengthen it and make it live longer, too. But you must use the right pruning procedures for the evergreen you're shaping.

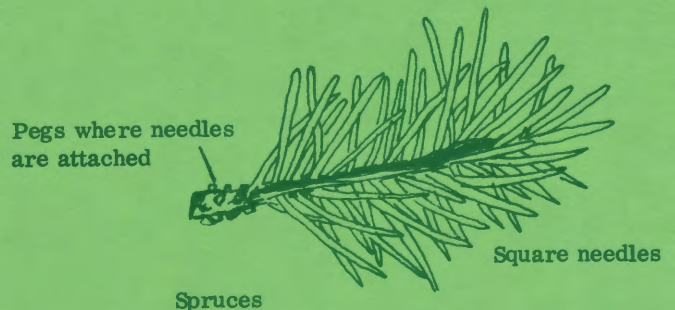
Evergreens can be grouped according to their growth patterns, and each group requires slightly different pruning techniques.

This fact sheet covers pruning of the spruces and firs. Companion fact sheets treat the pines and the junipers, arborvitae and yews. With any evergreen, begin pruning when it is young. Otherwise, you may one day have to butcher it.



## First, make sure it's a spruce or fir

Both spruces and firs bear their needles singly. The fir has flat needles and no pegs where the needles are attached; the spruce has square needles and pegs.





## What style do you prefer ?

A sheared spruce or fir is one where you cut off all tips periodically. The tree has a formal, tight appearance.

A pruned spruce or fir is selectively snipped; some individual branches or branchlets are partially removed periodically. The tree has a more feathery, natural look than a sheared one.

A constantly sheared evergreen will develop a tight 1- to 2-inch crust or shell of green growth outside of a central core of brown but living branches. All tips that you snip off will be visible. And if the shell of green is damaged, it takes a longer time for green foliage to cover the damaged area. Because of this, we don't recommend the shearing of individual trees.

An evergreen which is only pruned will be more open and will have green foliage from the trunk to the outside branch tips. The pruned tips will be hidden by other branches.

Some people never touch their spruces and firs with a pruning knife or shears. This works well, if the tree has room to spread and is strong. Sometimes corrective pinching of the tender, light green growth in the spring with the thumb and forefinger is all that's necessary. In the firs and spruces, a limb that is larger than your finger will not be replaced by the tree. So exercise caution in trimming.

If you have one that's outgrown its space, or that's damaged, or that you're using for hedge or edging, you must trim. Check your evergreens every year. October to April is the best time for trimming spruces and firs, but timing is not as critical as with the pines.



Sheared



Pruned



Untrimmed

October											
						1	2				
3	4	5	6	7	8	9					
10	11	12	13	14	15	16					
17	18	19	20	21	22	23					
24	25	26	27	28	29	30					

April											
						1	2	3			
4	5	6	7	8	9	10					
11	12	13	14	15	16	17					
18	19	20	21	22	23	24					
25	26	27	28	29	30						



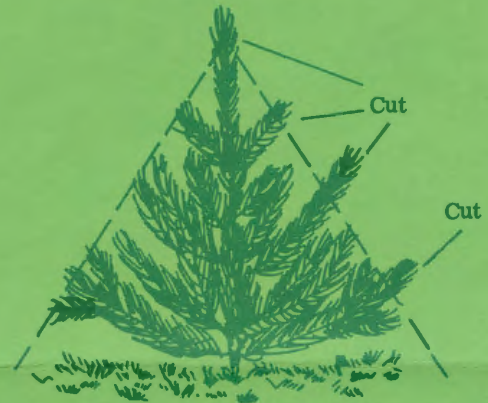
## To achieve a full-foliaged, well-balanced tree

By limiting the height growth of the very top leader to 9 or 12 inches you will bring the whorls of branches closer together.

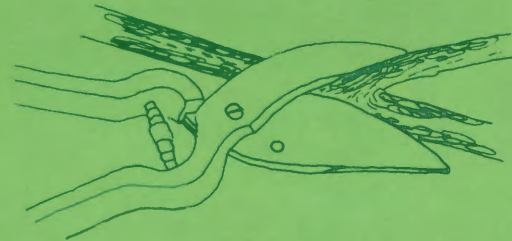
Just cut, above a bud. Another whorl will develop underneath the cut.

Removing individual lateral branches then balances the tree. Stay within the current year's growth (it's the growth that has buds on it). Find a bud and prune about  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch outside of it.

A short-handled pruning knife or a pruning shears as illustrated works best. If using a shears, keep the flat blade next to the stem.



Blade of shears is next to main branch. Always cut from the side to remove a branch at a crotch.



## If the tree has a broken top

It's not unusual for a tree to lose its top (or leader). Select the largest lateral of the nearest whorl and gently bend it up and tie to an attached brace. Use cloth ties (nylon hose is dark, soft, and elastic). Wire fasteners may girdle the growing tree. Cut back the other lateral branches by about half so that they do not compete with the shoot you have selected.



If the tree's top was broken for some time before you get to it, you may have a double or multiple leader developing. Remove the leaders farthest from the central axis.



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